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ABSTRACT

There has always been a tension in any form of democracy between the public good, majoritarian consensus, and the rights of minority groups and individuals. Some proponents of educational voucher plans suggest that putting more control in the hands of individuals through a laissez faire educational system will be in the public interest. John Coons and Stephen Sugarman claim that the family is the ideal educational decision-maker, that the best interest of the child must be given priority in educational decision-making, that this "best interest" lies in the development of the individual's autonomy, and that the quality of education will improve if educational suppliers must meet the demands of their clients. Coons and Sugarman also argue that educational diversity would foster a consensus supporting the present political system, would prove more democratic, and would reduce racism while increasing integration. These claims have no basis in established fact, but instead form a political argument that appeals to the currently popular but conflicting desires held by a number of widely divergent groups across the country. (Author/PGD)

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Abstract

In a social context of tax-payer revolt and educational decline and retrenchment, there has been renewed interest in the notion of educational vouchers as a way of financing public education. There have recently been several voter petition drives to place voucher initiatives on state ballots, and the debate over the implications and feasibility of vouchers has been a lively one. This paper examines the voucher issue from the perspective of an educational philosopher, using the voucher debate to raise general questions about the role of the family and the role of the state in public education. The author offers a careful analysis of the major claims and arguments of the most well known advocates of educational vouchers, John Coons and Stephen Sugarman, in their book, Education By Choice--The Case For Family Control (1978). The analysis is followed by an interpretation of the meaning and importance of the appeal of voucher plans, especially in terms of claims by their advocates of increased equity for the poor and minority groups. The approach throughout the essay is to focus on the philosophical and ideological issues involved, rather than on questions of costs and expediency of voucher plans.

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EDUCATIONAL VOUCHERS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR EQUITY

INTRODUCTION

What role ought the family to play in the schooling of young children in a democratic society? Traditionally, most families have sent their children to the neighborhood public school, where they have had little choice with regard to either its character or its composition. These choices and decisions have been left to professional educators and to the state, or, more specifically, to the elected representatives that constitute the state--from legislators who formulate state education requirements to local school administrators and board members who make decisions at the local level. The state was left to set the character of the public school: by choosing the content of the curiculum, by deciding on the qualifications for the hiring of teachers and administrators, and by deciding how to allocate the public expenditure on education. Clearly, parents were perceived as having some influence on this process through the ballot box, but in general there has been a sharp separation betweeen those decisions appropriate to the family with regard to public schooling and those more appropriate to the state. By and large, this practice has been accepted by most as a matter of course and in the public interest, and, aside from movements to and away from decentralization, this tradition of decision-making in the public school system has remained relatively unquestioned during the first three-quarters of this century.

In California and in other parts of the nation today, the tradition of limited family choice in education is facing a severe challenge. There has been a popular movement in California to place on the electoral ballot a voter initiative that would drastically change the state constitution to give individual families far more power in the educational decisions that effect their children. Regardless of the success of the "family choice" initiative, there is little doubt that the

leaders of the drive, John Coons and Stephen Sugarman, have been very successful in placing the public school under a challenging new and different scrutiny. In numerous public appearances and in their book, Education By Choice--The Case For Family Control,[1] Coons and Sugarman have argued that public schooling as we know it is inequitable and unfree, greatly favoring the rich and denying the poor and the middle class freedom of choice. Furthermore, schools are marked by a bureaucratic uniformity that is contrary to the interests of individual children. The ills of public schooling are massive, and nothing short of a radical transformation can save the schools. Coons and Sugarman argue that a solution lies in the infusion of system of family choice and parental control into the public school system.

Basically, family choice would involve the issuance of educational "vouchers" to families with school-age children. These vouchers, with a cash value approximately equivalent to the cost of one year's schooling (say $2000), could then be "cashed in" at schools which parents choose. While schooling would remain compulsory, a family could now choose to send its children not only to any public school of its choice but also to any private secular or religious school. Such a system would be administered by the state, and any school (public or private) in which vouchers were spent would have only to comply in meeting certain minimum curricular requirements set by the state, as well as ensuring fair admissions policies and due process protection of the rights of all students enrolled in a particular school.

In California, the sides have been drawn, and the debate over vouchers has been loud, hot, and rhetorical. There are indications that voucher movements will become popular in the rest of the nation. Some opponents have already claimed that "vouchers would destroy public schools and create...playgrounds for the promotion of prejudice."[2] What are the central issues here? What is the role of the family in public education in a democracy? The role of the state?

Will family choice bring about a more egalitarian educational system? Or will it provide a vehicle for even increased segregation and racism? Family choice and voucher schemes have been proposed before--why do they seem to have such popular appeal at this time?

In this essay I respond to these questions from the perspective of an educational philosopher. My concern is to draw out the central issues, using the voucher debate to raise general questions about the role of the family and the role of the state in public education, while at the same time offering a careful analysis of the major claims and arguments of Coons and Sugarman as the most popular and articulate advocates of family choice. It is important that the assumptions and logic of their arguments be drawn out and treated seriously, for they raise an important and radical challenge to conventional thinking about public schooling in America. This critical analysis of the case for family choice is followed by an interpretation of the meaning and importance of the appeal by Coons and Sugarman, especially in terms of its claims of increased equity for the poor and minority groups. My approach throughout is to focus on the philosophical and ideological issues involved, rather than on the questions of costs and expediency of a voucher plan. There have already been several excellent discussions of this latter set of questions, often at the expense of ignoring major philosophical issues.

Before examining the merits of the case for family choice as argued by Coons and Sugarman, it is important to note the place of their work in the last two decades of proposals for increased family choice in education. There have been several proposals advanced, and, as Henry Levin[3] has pointed out, it is important to distinguish exactly what one has in mind in arguments for and against vouchers. Indeed, Coons and Sugarman themselves recognize this in devoting a brief chapter of their book to placing their own work in the "context of the intellectual history of choice in education." The arguments put forth by Coons and Sugarman for their family choice plan are remarkably similar in many respects to those in support of the most well-known earlier voucher plan, the proposal advocated by conservative Nobel economist Milton Friedman nearly twenty-five years ago.[4] Friedman's plan would establish a real educational market-place in which all children would receive equal vouchers to be "cashed in" at state "approved" schools, which could also be private and profit making. Each school age child would receive an equal share of the public budget for education, but families could also "add-on" to their voucher allotment to purchase more expensive schooling for their children.

Like Coons and Sugarman, Friedman also grounds his proposal on basic criticisms of the public schooling system and its over-control by the government. Aware that there may have been a time in the history of schooling in the United States when it might have made sense to argue the appropriateness of instilling uniformity in education through increased government control and bureaucracy, Friedman asserts that such intervention is no longer either necessary or in the best interest of the nation or its children. Rather than the problem of enforcing conformity, Friedman suggests that with the present public schooling system we are threatened by an excess of conformity and

mediocrity. Furthermore, if it was ever their purpose, public schools are far from equalizing opportunity. The government monopoly or "nationalization" of schooling has led only to decreased economic efficiency and freedom of choice for parents. Like Coons and Sugarman, Friedman's solution was increased choice to parents through vouchers, and restricting government intervention to the role of ensuring minimum standards regarding teaching, student rights, and providing a minimal core of "common social values required for a stable society."[5] Schooling ought to be perceived as a consumer investment with certain market value. Viewing schooling as a competitive enterprise is likely to more efficient in meeting consumer demands, promote a more healthy variety of educational alternatives, introduce flexibility into the school system, and even diminish the class and race distinctions among schools (which mostly reflect residential segregation in the present system). I will return to a close examination of many of these arguments in my analysis of the case put forth by Coons and Sugarman, which seems to lie on a similar foundation.

Most proposals since the 1955 Friedman plan have been variations of his scheme. Christopher Jencks,[6] attempting to overcome the inequity of a plan where only the wealthy could afford to add on to the state vouchers to purchase more expensive education, has proposed a plan giving vouchers with greater dollar value to the poor. The plan proposed by Theodore Sizer and Phillip Whitten[7] suggests limiting vouchers to the poor exclusively. Coons and Sugarman have suggested a differential voucher plan, which is regulated and would give any child the right to attend a chosen school, regardless of family wealth. These variations give additional credence to Henry Levin's concern about the importance of distinguishing between types of voucher subsidies, types of schools involved (public or private or both), the state's role in the administration and "approval" of schools, and whether or not such schools

can be profit making.

In the many articles written for and against voucher plans in recent years, the authors typically note with puzzlement that since first proposed by Friedman, voucher plans have drawn support from advocates who occupy very different places on the political spectrum. Indeed, in an earlier essay, Coons himself has said that his "family power equalization plan" should be ". . .attractive to Black Panthers, John Birchers, Muslims, Catholics (laymen, not clerics), classical liberals, educational experimenters, property owners, residents of poor districts, and other disparate and overlapping cadres."[8] Few have attempted to explain the existence of such strange bedfellows. The clue lies in a careful examination of Coons and Sugarman's argument and the context in which it is argued. It is to the various elements of the case for family choice that we now turn.

Coons and Sugarman support their case upon an impressive foundation of criticism of the public schooling system in the United States. Their criticism is a serious one, well-rooted in the reality of public schooling, and it cannot be lightly dismissed. This foundation is buttressed by their use of the present social context in wich they frame their argument and appeal for family choice. This context provides a sympathetic atmosphere in which arguments for family choice are going to have special appeal. In what follows, I first describe this foundation of criticism and the social context in which it is framed; I then proceed to the major points of Coons and Sugarman's argument for family choice, which rests on notions of the best interest of the child, a conceptualization of the family, the importance of autonomy in education, and a prescription for improving educational quality through a competitive consumer model of education.

THE CRITIQUE OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

There is a strong and appealing egalitarian theme which pervades both the criticism upon which Coons and Sugarman support their arguments as well as the thrust of the arguments themselves. Although not much of their criticism is directed toward the mindless uniformity, bureaucracy, and inefficiency of the public schools, their major criticism revolves around the theme of inequality of the public school system. While children of the rich have always had choice among a variety of alternatives, poor families are locked into a public monopoly that offers little or no choice. The result is an institutionalized inequality for poor families and their children. Coons and Sugarman claim that this inequality surfaces in three ways. Poorer families in America are 1) less likely to be able to provide home remedies for educational ailments; 2) less likely to be able to escape an underfinanced or mismanaged school by changing their residence; and 3) less likely to have the ability to induce the public school system to provide the alternative programs or classrooms they prefer.[9] There is little doubt about the legitimacy and correctness of these criticisms. The poor are both relatively disenfranchised in terms of their ability to change the schools in their communities (increasingly controlled by large district bureaucracies) as well as relatively powerless in terms of the schooling options that have been more available to the middle and upper classes. Some critics of voucher proposals, in what often seems a knee-jerk reaction to protest the public school bureaucracy, have been too quick to dismiss the validity of these criticisms and to defend the public schools as they are.

Furthermore, with the advent of desegregation plans and large-scale bussing, even the middle-class option of moving into neighborhoods with good schools is being restricted. Families can no longer rest secure in the knowledge that

they can send their children to the school "around the corner." The problem is not only racism and opposition to integration, but a sense of decreasing individual freedom and autonomy for American families. Coons and Sugarman utilize the notion of individual freedom throughout their arguments, and with regard to the question of integration they cite survey data of the early 1970's, showing that while 70% of Americans were in favor of integrated schools, a large majority opposed compulsory bussing to attain them.[10]

THE FAILURE OF SCHOOL REFORM

Coons and Sugarman join this criticism of the public schooling system with a parallel criticism of the more than two decades of school reform efforts that, in their estimation, have been largely insufficient or have failed. In a brief and introductory way they review the major reform efforts of the 1960's and 1970's, distinguishing family choice from movements of "accountability," curriculum reform, community control, school-site budgeting, and the abolition of schools. Unlike their criticism of the schools themselves which are widely supported and shared by many, Coons and Sugarman's case against other reform efforts, and especially why family choice is more preferable, is not so firmly grounded. There is some difficulty with the comparability of these efforts with family choice. Movements for accountability and curriculum reform have different objectives and can very well go on in schools as they are; they in no way challenge the school system at the same level as does family choice. Likewise, the abolition of schools is not a reform effort at all and defies comparison. The only comparable reform has been the movement toward community control of schools, and here Coons and Sugarman both hedge and say too little.

COMMUNITY CONTROL

Community control movements are comparable to plans for family choice

in their objectives: they have arisen out of egalitarian concerns for the minority poor, they seek to give power and options to those who have been traditionally disenfranchized, and they seek to break the control of schooling by large and impersonal administrative bureaucracies. Like family choice schemes, community control would move the locus of power and decision-making closer to the lives of the children. Coons and Sugarman hedge in their discussion of community control in that they do not make a compelling case for family choice over this option--an option that could be readily available without radical changes in state legislation and the taxing structure would not likely involve the creation of new administrative structures, and would likely be less costly and less complicated than family choice as well.

Coons and Sugarman's criticisms of community control efforts are of two sorts. The first is that the data on the success of community control are not yet in and there is little evidence that traditional academic achievement has improved. This criticism is both peculiar and weak in two ways. First, improvement of traditional academic achievement is seldom used as a major objective in their case for family choice, yet here it is used as a major criterion in evaluating the success or failure of community control. There are many other criteria which could be seen as equally important. Second, in so far as the data aren't in, isn't it far too early to pronounce community control a failure, especially given the trying political circumstances in which many community control battles were waged in the late 1960's? On these grounds, there are <u>no</u> data on the potential success of family choice, and hence we could as well judge it a failure.

The second criticism which Coons and Sugarman lodge against community control is more substantial. In distinguishing family choice from community control as a reform effort, they stress the point that family choice would

give every individual family a choice as to the appropriate schooling for their children, while with community control, even though it gives the poor communities control over their schools, individual families would still be subject to majoritarian consensus within their communities. For Coons and Sugarman, this condition oppresses local minorities within communities, hence community control, "while it relies on linkage to the home, for many families it lacks the capacity to deliver."[11]

This criticism is a major one and it raises questions of basic philosophical questions about individuals in society. For Coons and Sugarman, no form of majoritarian consensus is satisfactory with regard to schooling, either at the state or local community levels. The rights of individual choice are to be protected even over public or community concerns agreed upon through political consensus. To do otherwise is to be oppressive. There is more support here for a philosophy of consumerism rather than democracy as a way of making choices. This assumption and the form of criticism it leads to is particularly interesting in light of the case for ideological pluralism that Coons and Sugarman see as a central element later in their argument for family choice; this is a direction away from the fact that much of their appeal is addressed to powerless groups in society: the poor, minority racial and ethnic groups, religious minorities, political minorities (on both the right and left), and the "non-rich" in general. Although they are clearly aware of the differences between the middle classes and the minority poor, the use of the term "non-rich" allows Coons and Sugarman to cluster their interests together, even though they are often different and conflicting. This seeming contradiction in arguing for both pluralist group interests and radical individualism will be returned to later in this essay. At this point it is sufficient to note the important philosophical question about the individual's role (as well as the individual's rights and responsibilities) in society.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT IN WHICH VOUCHERS ARE PROPOSED

Coons and Sugarman frame the foundation for their argument for family choice within a contemporary social context in which voucher plans seem especially appealing. In addition to a long standing atmosphere of dissatisfaction and criticism of the public schools, there is wide-spread general distrust of government control and spending by government bureaucracies. Acutely aware of this widespread alienation, Coons and Sugarman make their case in terms which mesh well with movements toward privatism and individualism, consumer power, and taxpayer revolt. They are quick to point to the statistics showing a rapid increase in the percentage of American families already choosing private schools for their children, as well as the inequity of public taxation--"the rich get choice and deductions, the poor get sent [to public school]."

Perhaps most appealing of all, Coons and Sugarman center their case around the priority of the family. There is no institution in American society that has been more romanticized, protected, and stood seemingly impervious to criticism until recently. Moreover, within the last decade, partially as a result of a vigorous feminist movement, traditional notions of the family have been severely challenged. These traditions have been equally challenged by the facts. Studies of youth alienation, and in particular, youth suicide, show alarming increases. On a daily basis, the mass media carry accounts of equally alarming increases in divorce rates and numbers of battered wives and children. All of this contributes to a mood of dispair and fear for the eventual dissolution of the family. Even in past periods of economic hardship, most could believe in the stability of the family to help get one through. In the current period of inflation and tax-revolt, which seems to be touching the middle classes more than usual, middle-class notions of the family have also been critically shaken.

In this atmosphere of alienation and anomie, any proposal which appears to return integrity and power to the American family is likely to be attractive. Coons and Sugarman's proposal for family choice clearly does this. Their stress on family choice and family control rather than the earlier languages of educational vouchers and entitlements is not likely accidental. "Family choice" invokes an imagery of stable families sitting down together to rationally make educational choices in the best interest of their children. Little could be more appealing in an atmosphere where so much else seems unsatisfactory or uncertain. Like Christopher in his recent book, Coons and Sugarman believe that the family can be defended from its most recent attacks and they, too, paint a picture of the American family as a last Haven in a Heartless World.[12]

This foundation of massive criticism of the public schools as well as the critical social context in which Coons and Sugarman frame their appeal for a voucher system are as important as the points of their argument themselves. They provide an ideological context in which the American public will want to believe in the efficacy and potential results of the family choice model. By drawing heavily on current public values--the family, consumer integrity, the best interest of children, lower taxes, individual freedom, and dissatisfaction with government control and bureaucracy, Coons and Sugarman create an extremely sympathetic framework for their argument--a framework that is likely to appeal to a variety of people for a variety of reasons. It now remains for us to examine the major points of their argument in isolation from this context.

CENTRAL ELEMENTS OF THE COONS AND SUGARMAN PROPOSAL

There are four major areas in which Coons and Sugarman develop their case for a voucher plan, all of them rest on extremely tentative assumptions. These are (1) the notion that the family is the ideal educational decision-maker; (2) the notion that priority ought to be given in this decision-making to the "best interest of the child"; (3) the related notion that the best

interest of the child, and of education generally, lies in the development of "autonomy"; and (4) the notion that the quality of education will dramatically improve through a family choice model involving competition and a consumer/market model for education.

THE FAMILY AS THE IDEAL DECISION-MAKER

The argument for the family as the ideal educational decision-maker is based on a peculiar train of logic and assumptions, and it is a form of argument by default. Without specifying in much detail exactly what they mean, Coons and Sugarman begin their discussion with the limiting assumption that "society's sole objective in education is the best interest of the individual child and, accordingly, that in no case will government deliberately use a child as an instrument of a social policy inconsistent with his well-being."[13] Given this assumption, Coons and Sugarman reason that the major task is to decide which is the most appropriate decision-making unit to determine the best interest of the child. A natural candidate is the state, but they point out that while most people would agree that education ought to be in the best interest of the individual child, there is little consensus at the national level over both the ends and means of education. There is fundamental value conflict and discord at a general level, and this is complicated by the fact of the individual differences of each child and the consequent unlikelihood that global objectives and means would address the specific needs of each child. With this assumption, Coons and Sugarman make a move by default. Since society at large often cannot know the best interest of the child, the sole role of the state is to decide whom it shall empower to decide what is best.[14] After stipulating that the process "should always incorporate the child's own voice expressed with a decision-making community that is knowledgeable and caring about him" and

relying on a vague and undefined "principle of subsidiarity" (small is better?), Coons and Sugarman decide that the family is the ideal decision-making unit. They support their choice of the family with claims that the family has intimate personal knowledge of the child, spends much more time with the child than school professionals, is the child's ultimate confidant and hence more likely to know and care about the child's needs, and has the most to gain (or lose) by the child's success or failure in school and is thus more likely to protect its own interest by making good choices, much like an investment in property.[15]

BEST INTEREST OF THE CHILD

There is much in this line of reasoning that is in need of close examination and comment. The notion of "best interest of the child" is a most interesting one. It clearly has great rhetorical appeal without specifying very much. Who, after all, would argue against the best interest of the child? It functions like other educational slogans: persuasively appealing to most people, yet ambiguous enough to allow a variety of interpretations as to their meanings. In addition to the emptiness of the notion of "best interest" when left so unspecified, Coons and Sugarman's logic in arriving at the notion is contorted. From the fact there is a lack of consensus at the national level over the goals and means of education, they reason that society cannot know the best interest of the individual child.[16] Yet, Coons and Sugarman have given us little cause to concede either of these points or to accept them as premises in their argument. Reasoning from the fact that society or the state has not reached consensus on the goals and means of education does not logically imply that such a consensus cannot ever be reached. Not only is this a faulty way to reason, the initial assumption is also questionable. There are plenty of instances that reflect a consensus of the state with regard to education, from the

language of state education codes to that of Supreme Court decisions.

Coons and Sugarman's second step, in moving from the notion that education ought to be in the best interest of the child to the notion that it is society's sole or primary objective is just as questionable. The history of public schooling shows that the state's concern with schooling has always been a major and substantial one, from "americanization" to preparation for citizenship, to the creation of more equal opportunity, to functional literacy, to keeping youth out of the adult labor market. These have been and continue to be compelling state interests, and they cannot be lightly dismissed as 'ideological fluff' or treated as if they always have lower priority than the best interest of the child. They seldom have had lower priority, and in arguing that they do instead of arguing that they should, Coons and Sugarman make a fundamental misreading of the history of American schooling.

It is not surprising that Coons and Sugarman should see the family as the ideal decision-making unit for the educational lives of children. Such a choice is consistent with classical liberalism and a philosophy of individualism, where individual rights and individual property are to receive the highest priority. Given the difficulty of arguing for the logical extension of individualism, that is, for the rights of individual children to make their own decisions, they opt for the family as custodians of the child's individualism until it reaches the age of reason and responsibility. This alternative is both more appealing and easier to argue for. There are two central difficulties here. First, they rely on a vague and unspecified "principle of subsidiarity" which they say is "a principle of great value to any political order concerned with maximizing personalistic values....and hold that responsibility for dependent individuals ought to belong to the smaller and more intimate rather than the larger and more anonymous communities...."[17] Although they

note that such an important principle ought to be thoroughly justified, they instead assure us that the principle "captures the grist of common sense, tradition, and experience." What is most important here is that even if the principle could be substantiated (and it is not in Coons and Sugarman's work), it in itself gives us little reason for choosing the family over other small decision-making units. Coons and Sugarman quickly dismiss this possibility in less than two pages of their book, arguing that only the family has the continuity, the altruism, and the personal investment necessary for good decision-making.

In fact, a rather good case could be made for an alternative decision-making unit consisting of a coalition of parents, the child, the teacher, and perhaps the school principal. To say that this unit often does not function effectively does not mean that it cannot. One might argue for such a unit as providing a more balanced protection of the child, bringing together the state's interest in the child with the family's interest, guided by some professional expertise in education and pedagogy. Instead, we are provided with a bogus choice between professionals making assignments for "children they have never met" and parents supported by professional counselors.

With regard to the family itself, there is much that seems puzzling in the description provided for us. One is not sure whether giving the family a more complete power over educational decisions is a remedy for rescuing public schooling or for rescuing an image of the family that no longer corresponds to reality. We have already discussed the context of alienation and family dissolution within which Coons and Sugarman frame their argument. Everywhere one looks there are data that call to question the efficacy of the family. Divorce rates continue to increase. Increases in child abuse have been described as an insidious epidemic and a national disgrace, and "probably the most common cause of death among children today, outnumbering

those due to any of the infectuous diseases, leukemia, and automobile accidents"[18]. Alienation among the young, and perhaps its most extreme manifestation, suicide, has increased rapidly in our culture. Between the years 1950 and 1975, the suicide rate among white young people between the ages of 15 and 19 increased 171%, compared to an overall increase of 18%.[19] Other forms of violence among the young have also increased. The rate of death by homicide among the same age group increased more than 200%.[20] In addition, the traditional household unit is no longer so clearly the family. It is estimated that one of every four households is now composed of people living along or unrelated, an increase of 66% in the last decade. The number of families headed by individual women has increased 32% in the same decade, with nearly 30% of all black families headed by a single woman in 1979.[21] Interpretations of these disturbing data vary with regard to causes and solutions. They nevertheless point to a deeply troubled society, with many of its basic institutions, including the family, undergoing rapid and not always positive change.

Yet, in their argument for family choice, Coons and Sugarman write as if this reality were non-existent, and instead paint for us a portrait of the family romanticized to the extreme--a beacon of caring and stability in a sea of impersonal and control-hungry government agencies. They create a false dichotomy of choice between a continuous, caring and intimate family on the one hand, and a cool, abstract, non-altrustic, and "shallow professional relation of education" on the other. Between the "staunch commitment of parents" whose love "is the historic archetype of altruism", and a government that makes choices "in total ignorance of the child's wishes or special qualities"[22], how could one choose otherwise? To label this dichotomy as false and misleading is not to argue that families <u>cannot</u> be caring and altruistic and that school systems are not cold and bureaucratic. It is only

to say that they are not necessarily so, and one could marshal a great deal of evidence to show that they are often places marked by opposite qualities. In their argument for the fam-ly as the ideal decision-making unit, Coons and Sugarman are unconvincing with their romantization of the family as well as their distorted vision of what they would have us believe are the necessary qualities of public schools and professional educators.

In addition to these questionable claims and assumptions about the best interest of the child and the family as the ideal decision-making unit, there are two other elements that play a central role in their argument for a voucher plan. One is their discussion of education for autonomy, and the other is the notion that the quality of education will dramatically improve through a family choice model involving competition and a consumer/market model. Both of these notions are as equally questionable as the first two, and we now turn to each of them.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUTONOMY

Hard pressed to say something more about the ambiguous notion of "best interest of the child", Coons and Sugarman introduce in chapter five of their book the equally difficult notion of autonomy. For them, the best interest of the child is the development of the child into an autonomous individual. Their discussion begins with an initial difficulty, in that in so far as they are trying to convince us with an argumant, they do not substantiate their choice of autonomy over other likely candidates for best interest, such as happiness, self-fulfillment, contribution to society, good citizenship, or scholastic achievement. They merely advance autonomy as their personal choice. Because it is easy to accept autonomy as a desireable goal in the education of children, it is also easy to overlook the fact that coons and sugarman are asserting it as the goal of education. Once this concession is made, they are well on their way in their argument. But even if we were to assume that autonomy were the

goal, there are other grave difficulties along the path.

Coons and Sugarman begin with an impressive and persuasive definition of autonomy as "the full development of the child's latent capacities for independent reflection and for judgment on issues of personal morality and social justice; it is the link between intellect and responsible action."[23] Their definition continues with the conditions under which autonomy can be attained:

> But autonomy requires more than minimums; we believe it demands the child's exposure to and dialogue with issues of justice and personal morality. His education should draw him into that human exchange about the nature of the good life which in large measure is the central subject of the permanent debate among a democratic people. [24]

It is easy to be impressed by this definition. In many ways it captures the everyday ideology of pluralism in a democratic society as well as what many believe ought to be going on in schools. Yet, even if we were to accept this sense of autonomy as an important goal of education, there are two sorts of difficulties that immediately follow. First, no sooner have they given us the definition than they begin to restrict and limit it tremendously. They quickly add that autonomy can involve a rejection of family ways, ethnicity, childhood religion;...but it need not. Autonomy is neither rescue from mother and father nor does it entail "liberation from adult imposition."[25] Autonomy is not necessarily a condition of an actor freely acting in the world, but rather some state of mind, "it is a state of personal being approachable by even the most wretched and objectively dependent of humans."[26] Just as quickly as we were impressed by their definition of autonomy, we become unimpressed and lose any sense of what they might mean by the notion. We suspect the qualifications on the definition are rhetorical ones, calculated to appeal to parents who might be attracted to the notion of family choice and control, but uneasy about autonomy being interpreted as more freedom for

their children.

The second difficulty has to do with the way Coons and Sugarman argue that it is impossible for the public schools to produce autonomy in children while family choice schools would. Their artument for the impossibility of autonomy in the public schools begins from the idea that many arguments for autonomy are based on the notion of the neutrality of teaching and teachers. But, they argue, it is an illusion that public educational institutions (or the people who work in them) can be neutral. Hence, if public schools cannot be neutral, they conclude (and here is the flaw in their argument) the development of autonomy is impossible within the public schools. Yet, even if their premise about the illusion of neutrality is true, all that Coons and sugarman have shown is that in so far as the development of autonomy is dependent on neutrality, it is an impossibility in the schools. Not only have they not shown neutrality to be a necessary condition for autonomy, they ignore the many other conditions besides neutrality which might foster autonomy. In fact, there is ample evidence that many autonomous individuals have been the product of public schools, despite their non-neutrality. Aren't we to believe that Coons and Sugarman are addressing their arguments to those of us who are autonomous individuals capable of making choices as well as products of the public school?

The argument put forth for the likely development of autonomy in family choice schools is faulty in a similar way. They argue that the non-neutrality of family-choice schools is a necessary condition for the development of autonomy. The reasoning here is based on extremely vague and unsubstantiated assumptions in a train of logic that approaches the mystical. Family choice schools, in their non-neutrality, would foster autonomy because "there may be a linkage between tribal ways and the path to independent moral judgment."[27]

Here we are to believe that even in those schools marked by extremely narrow values, autonomy would be a likely end product.

> The most important experience within schools of choice may be the child's observation of trusted adults gripped by a moral concern which is shared and endorsed by its own family....Even where particular values seem narrow and one-sided, a child's engagement with them at a crucial stage of his development might secure his allegiance to that ideal of human reciprocity which is indespensable to our view of autonomy. (emphasis mine) 28

Note the use of the words may and might in the above passage. Basically, Coons and Sugarman are arguing from the possibility of something happening to its necessary occurrance. They follow this reasoning with an example of a child in a Black Muslim school, who through learning about black heros who have suffered injustice, will make an existential leap to learning about injustice as a universal problem,a mark of a truly autonomous individual. While surely a desired outcome, we have no reason to believe it is a necessary one. If, in fact, Coons and Sugarman were correct about this necessary outcome of non-neutrality, and it is likely that they are not, it would constitute a good argument for public schools as they are, because Coons and Sugarman have convinced us that they aren't neutral.

In summary, while we might agree with Coons and Sugarman that the development of autonomy is a desirable goal for children, they have not been convincing in their description of what is fully entailed by the notion, they have not made a solid case that autonomy ought to be the primary goal of education, nor have they convincingly argued that the public school monopoly does not produce autonomy while family choice schools would. In so far as best interest and autonomy are central to their justification for a voucher system, they have been singularly unconvincing.

IMPROVING QUALITY THROUGH VOUCHERS

The fourth and last major element in the argument for family choice is the notion that the quality of education will dramatically improve through a family choice model involving competition and a consumer/market model. Entailed in this notion of improved quality are the ideas that the ideological diversity that would come with family choice schools would strengthen the nation, that racism would decrease, and that integration would increase and be more successful. These last notions are important in that critics of voucher schemes have been quick to point out that family choice would encourage the developemnt of segregationist private white academies. This was, in fact, a result of the tuition voucher schools which were set up in six southern states after the Brown decision. All six of these efforts were eventually declared unconstitutional by the courts.[29] To their credit, the plan advanced by Coons and Sugarman is a regulated voucher scheme under which it would be illegal to discriminate on grounds of race or sex in admissions to family choice schools. However, whether racism would decrease and integration increase is another question. Schools would have an incentive to "discriminate" or"segregate: through a strong advertising appeal that makes obvious the clientele who are sought and the environment that will characterize the school. No blacks allowed will not be necessary in "Christian Family Schools" emphasizing fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible. Black Panther schools will hardly need to discriminate against whites in admissions. It is likely that the outcome would be even more segregation along even more diverse dimensions.[30]

Although Coons and Sugarman are anxious to dissociate their proposal from the unregulated voucher scheme and pure market model first proposed by Milton Friedman, much of the language of their argument is similar and couched in notions of a competitive market model for education. Basically, education is

seen as a private investment where parents will act (choose) in such a way as to maximize their investment. Through a good information system (both formal and informal), schools that are good investments will become known, while those that are not will die due to lack of patronage, just as inferior products eventually die through competition in the marketplace. Because public schooling is currently a monopoly with a captive audience, there is no way to improve or eliminate the inferior. As Coons has stated in a recent interview, "its not like any other institution in the market where if it isn't performing up to a people's ideas of what it should be doing it simply dies. There is no way for a public school to die. We would like to provide it with that opportunity.[31]

There are two basic questions which must be asked of this market analogy. The first is whether all schooling ought to be considered as just a private consumer good subject to the trials of a competitive market. The second question has to do with whether competition in the market actually works the way Coons and Sugarman suggest it does, and whether, in the case of schooling, it would produce substantial increases in overall quality. The notion of education as a private consumer good, while attractive in a social climate of individualism, consumer movements, tax revolt, and a tight economy, stands against a history of more than a century of public schooling. Both in this country and elsewhere, public schooling has been perceived as a major element in fostering the common good of society, not private interests. Whether schooling is perceived as a major ideological apparatus of the state or the ideal training ground for good citizenship, all states have used public schooling to support their sense of the common good. In our own country, the common good has been interpreted as preparation for social democracy. As Levin, Tyack, and others have pointed out,[32] to dismiss to diminish this fundamental role of public schooling is not only to challenge the actual historical role of the school (and there is ample evidence

that it has performed this role effectively although far from perfectly), but also to fundamentally challenge the goals of social democracy and suggest a perhaps dangerous form of privatism. R. Freeman Butts[33] also reminds us that not only would a voucher scheme move us toward privatism, but it would do so at public expense; that is, for the first time in history private educational endeavors of all sorts--religious, ideological, or whatever--would be financed through public taxation. It is important to note that to raise these questions about the historical role of the public school, in this society or in any other, is not nexessarily to defend them as they are, but rather to point out what is at stake in funamentally disrupting that role.

A question of equal gravity is whether or not competition would function in the way that voucher advocates claim that it would. Stephen Arons has raised several questions about the analogy to a regulated market system, noting the potential dangerous effects in the wide separation between consumers and producers, the possible presense of a profit motive which would outweigh motives in the public interest, and the possibility that an information system could turn into advertising hucksterism.[34] The notion that improved quality always follows from competition is equally questionable. There is little evidence of this in other "competitive" products of mass consumption: whether it be television, the newspaper industry, or the automobile industry. True, there are many alternatives to choose from, but it is a fundamental mistake to equate the presense of alternatives with either higher quality or what the public wants. It may be a serious mistake to equate public wants with public needs. All that might be guaranteed by a voucher scheme is that some sort of educational options would exist, not necessarily those that families want or need. Like commercial TV, the public may be faced with a plethora of "alternatives," none of which are particularly good or attractive. Here, the poor, in whose name

family choice is most often advance, might be especially vulnerable, not having the time or resources to take advantage of the voucher option to start their won schools. Short of starting your own shcool, there is no guarantee of getting what you want. Like so many other educational reforms, all that would be guaranteed is a formal equality of opportunity, not an actual equality of results.

VOUCHERS AND EQUALITY

This last concern leads us to the egalitarian theme in the improved quality of education which Coons and Sugarman see resulting from their voucher plan. They make three claims along these lines, which they say are in keepng with the traditional objectives of schooling. Their voucher plan would help foster a consensus supporting the constitutional order through the system of educational pluralism that would result, racism would decrease, and integration would increase. While these are all important and desirable objectives for our society, there is no strong evidence that would cause us to believe that any of these results would follow from the institution of a voucher plan. If anything, what little evidence there is points in the other direction.

While we agree with Coons and Sugarman on the value of the ideological diversity and educational pluralism that a voucher system would seemingly support their notion that national consensus would be increased is replete with difficulties. They point out that the pluralism that they support is not the traditional notion of competitive groups whose interests are the subject of negotiation and compromise in the political arena, but rather a pluralism of individuals (or individual families) whose rights to ideological diversity in education are paramount. For Coons and Sugarman, family choice schools would entail more emotionally secure children, and a child in such a school "...is likely not only to be more tolerant, but also to be concerned with maintaining

the social order which has respected."[35] There is little evidence to support any of the three assumptions in this claim, let alone the resulting claim that the national consensus would be improved through a system supporting extreme ideological diversity. If anything, the history of public schooling in this country has shown remarkable success in fostering consensus through a lack of diversity.

That a voucher system would also be more democratic, as Coons and Sugarman claim, is also problematic. The history of democracy from its evolution in the Greek city-state to the representative democracy of the present has always entailed some form of majoritarian political consensus. While there has always been a tension and a concern for the protection of individual rights like free speech and the vote, no form of democracy has existed which entailed the rights of individuals to override or ignore points of concensus on the common good. To claim that family choice through its philosophy of individualism is more democratic is to fundamentally misconstrue or misunderstand the notion of democracy; in fact, the opposite may be the case. A democratic concensus may very well be dependent on a set of shared values and traditions which radical individualism would work against.

With regard to the issues of racism and integration, there is again little evidence that would lead us to believe that family choice would improve matters very much. The case that Coons and Sugarman offer is based largely on speculation. They reason that were voluntary (as opposed to forced) integration to occur, implicit racism in the schools would likely decline, since the grounds for racism, compulsion and hostility, would have been removed. They further speculate that given a choice between quality integrated schools, and private segregationist academies such as those which developed in the South after the Brown decision, most families would choose integration. There is no doubt that <u>some</u> white families would opt for integration, but the suggestion

that most would flies in the face of what did happen in the South as well as in the case of "white flight" from northern urban centers: both are clear examples of private choice and just as likely indications of future directions under a system of publicly subsidized family choice.

In the end, we are most bothered by the conclusions which are left after the speculations of improvements are removed from the analysis offered by Coons and Sugarman. In so far as they are committed to the enfranchisement of the poor, the elimination of racism, and the integration of the public schools, which they vigorously asset as the major objectives of education, we are bothered by their acceptance of the abusive forms of racism that are likely to continue under the system of family choice which they propose:

> Nevertheless, abuses are impossible to eliminate and should be expected to continue under a system of choice, even though we predict that on the whole self-selected integration would tend to diminish such practices. As is now true, private misbehavior could give particular shcools informal reputations as places in which minorities (or whites) are not welcome. The law is helpless to prevent this whether or not choice is the policy. However, choice may at least make private racism more nearly bearable where a selection of popular integrated schools is available and where the rights of families choosing any schools are vigorously defended.36 (emphasis mine)

There is a similar recognition and acceptance that segregation might continue, even under a system of family choice:

> However, if government has established and consistently striven to maintain the conditions of free choice for individuals, we could not condemn those among us of any color who have chosen by racial clustering in their education to preserve special racial links they may value for reasons of their own. These persons bear no duty to justify their preference; indeed, such deeply personal values could scarcely be communicated to those who do not already share them....We understand such a committment to be a fundamental and defining feature of our own society. The choice of racial separation, so long as it is free, should be solemnly respected, even if the motivation of those (including ourselves) who promote this principle deserves close scrutiny.37

We have in these two passages serious contradictions in the overall argument put before us by Coons and Sugarman. In so far as integration and the elimi-

nation of racism are major objectives of education in our society, there is some doubt that Coons and Sugarman believe that they should have a greater priority than rights to individual choice. In so far as increased integration and the elimination of racism are major justifications for the institution of a voucher system, we have been given little evidence to believe that these objectives would result. In fact, we have in these passages the recognition that they are not likely to result. How, then, are we to interpret the argument put before us by Coons and Sugarman, a case that on the one hand has appealed to so many, yet on the other hand is so deficient in its assumptions and logic? It is to this interpretation that we turn in our concluding section.

In an earlier section of this paper we were intrigued and puzzled by the fact that the case for vouchers seemed to appeal to very divergent groups, "Black Panthers, John Birchers, Muslims, Catholics, classical liberals, educational experimenters property owners, residents of poor districts, and other disparate and overlapping cadres." The solution to this puzzle is now at hand. On the one hand, it is quite clear that many who have been attracted to the notion of vouchers have also focused their attention on various aspects of vounchers and not on the voucher proposals in their entirety. The use of persuasive language and slogans (which are often ambiguous and empty) by the principle advocates of vouchers have made it especially easy to do this. Thus vouchers are likely to appeal to individuals because they seem to satisfy particular interests rather than because they endorse vouchers in their entirety. Will vouchers decrease uniformity? Will vouchers reduce levels of or increases in taxation? Will they give me a chance to start a radical (or conservative) school? Will school quality improve? Will racism be decreased? Will the family be reinforced? Will pluralism in society increase? Will the national concensus supporting the state increase? Will private schools be saved? Will I be able

to send my child to a school that is mostly white (or mostly black)? Will equal opportunity increase? Will I be able to avoid bussing my children? Interestingly enough, voucher plans have been presented to us as a single educational reform that answers all of these serious concerns with a resounding "yes." No wonder natural intuition is beginning to draw out those who are skeptical of such a panecea.

On the other hand, we are intrigued as to why the case for vouchers, especially as put forth by Coons and Sugarman, can function in this persuasive way, when so little of social science scholarship does. In the last analysis, we find that the case for family choice is not an example of social science at all. It is a political treatise, calculated to persuade with rhetorial language and personal appeal in the way a lawyer might address a jury in a concluding argument, and not to convince one in the manner of a good philosophical or scientific argument, which rest on the clarity of its terms, the soundness of its logic, and the evidence of its assumptions.

There is a deeper reason, though, for the attractiveness of the case put forth by Coons and Sugarman. Like good lawyers in a courtroom, they have done their homework and assessed the jury quite well. They are acutely aware of the social context in which they frame their argument, and they have been able to capture the mood of the country and the concerns of its people. This mood has been a conservative and increasingly libertarian one, oriented around the control of government (especially government spending) and a philosophy of radical individualism. The liberalism they espouse often resembles the early nineteenth century version of liberalism, which focused on freedom, the individual as the ultimate entity of society, and a laissez faire economic system, rather than the public welfare and actual as opposed to formal equality. As Milton

Friedman points out with distaste, this "true liberalism" is now labeled conservative. Twentieth century liberalism, Friedman contends, regards welfare and equality as either prerequisites of or alternatives to freedom.[38]

Coons and Sugarman have tried to appeal to both types of liberals, but as a substantial argument their case is both a weak one as well as one which raises serious questions as to whether they can have it both ways. In a sense, the rhetorical appeal of their case is a good example of what Michael Walzer has called the "crisis of liberal triumph," resulting from the maximization of an untempered individualism for all.[39] There has always been a tension in any form of democracy between the public good, majoritarian concensus, and the rights of minority groups and individuals. Family choice suggests that putting more control in the hands of individuals through a laissez faire educational system will still be in the public interest. We think not. We agree with George La Noue:

> Substituting consumer accountability for political accountability is not in the long run a good bargain for either parents or society. Majority rule should be tempered with a respect for minority differences and public education should offer many alternatives, but deciding educational policy forces a society to confront ultimate questions about its future. Such decisions are better made through the democratic process than the marketplace.[40]

NOTES

1. John E. Coons and Stephen Sugarman, Education By Choice--The Case for Family Control. Berkely: University of California Press, 1978.

2. See the Column, "Where We Stand" by Albert Shanker, president of the United Federation of Teachers, in New York Times (Sunday, September 23, 1979) p. E9

3. Henry M. Levin, "Educational Vouchers and Social Policy," a publication of the Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance, School of Education, Stanford University, Program Report No. 79-B12 (July, 1979).

4. Milton Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education," in Robert A. Solo (ed.) Economics and the Public Interest. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1955. Also in Milton Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

5. Friedman, p. 90.

6. Christopher Jencks, "Is the Public School Obsolete?" The Public Interest 18 (Winter, 1966) 18-27. Also Christopher Jencks and Judith Areen, "Educational Vouchers: A Proposal for Diversity and Choice," Teachers College Record 72 (February, 1971) 327-336.

7. Theodore Sizer and Phillip Whitten, "A Proposal for a Poor Children's Bill of Rights," Psychology Today 58 (1968).

8. Quoted in Stephen Arons, "Equity, Option, and Vouchers," Teachers College Record 72 (February, 1971) 337-364.

9. Coons and Sugarman, P. 26.

10. Coons and Sugarman, p. 115

11. Coons and Sugarman, p. 85.

12. Christopher Lasch, Haven in a Heartless World - The Family Beseiged. New York: Basic Books, 1977.

13. Coons and Sugarman, p. 35.

14. Coons and Sugarman, p. 45.

15. Coons and Sugarman, pp. 52-59.

16. Coons and Sugarman, p. 45. The point here is that there is almost total lack of attention to the meaning of "best interest," even though it plays such an important role in Coons and Sugarman's argument. This author is aware that the notion has been in the legal literature at least since Benjamin Cardozo used it in a 1925 decision (Finley v. Finley). It remains nevertheless a notion repleat with difficulties. For a discussion of some of the conceptual problems, see Robert H. Mnookin, "Foster Care - In Whose Best Interests?" Harvard Educational Review 43 (November, 1973) 599-638.

17. Coons and Sugarman, p. 49.

18. Dr. Vincent J. Fontana, quoted in Theodore Irwin, "To Combat Child Abuse and Neglect," Public Affairs Pamphlet no. 508. New York: Public Affairs Committee, 1974.

19. Edward A. Wynne, "Behind the Discipline Problem: Youth Suicide As A Measure of Alienation," Phi Delta Kappan 59 (January, 1978) p. 308.

20. Ibid.

21. Recent report of the U.S. Census Bureau, reported in the San Francisco Chronicle (November 26, 1979) p. 5.

22. Coons and Sugarman, pp. 53-56.

23. Coons and Sugarman, p. 72

24. Coons and Sugarman, p. 76.

25. Coons and Sugarman, p. 75.

26. Coons and Sugarman, p. 74.

27. Coons and Sugarman, p. 83.

28. Ibid.

29. For a discussion and references, see Walter McCann and Judith Areen, "Vouchers and the Citizen--Some Legal Questions, "Teachers College Record 72 (February, 1971) 389-404. Also reprinted in George R. La Noue (ed.), Educational Vouchers: Concepts and Controversies. New York: Teachers College Press, 1972.

30. Henry Levin is responsible for pointing this out.

31. Interview in the Peninsula Tribune (November 19, 1979). Palo Alto, California

32. Henry Levin, op. cit.; David Tyack, Michael Kirst, and Elizabeth Hansot, "Educational Reform: Retrospect and Prospect," a publication of the Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance, School of Education, Stanford University, Project Report No. 79-A5 (September, 1979).

33. R. Freeman Butts, "Educational Vouchers: The Private Pursuit of the Public Purse," Phi Delta Kappan 61 (September, 1979) 7-9.

34. Arons, "Equity, Option, and Vouchers,: p. 357.

35. Coons and Sugarman, p. 99.

36. Coons and Sugarman, p. 120.

37. Coons and Sugarman, p. 128.

38. Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom, pp. 5-6.

39. Michael Walzer, "Nervous Liberals," New York Review of Books (October 11, 1979).

40. George La Noue, "Vouchers: The End of Public Education?" in his Educational Vouchers: Concepts and Controversies. New York: Teachers College Press, 1972, p. 145.